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SUBJECT George Kennan Discusses Soviet Developments

ROBERT MACNEIL: Finally tonight, a conversation with George Kennan. Often called the foremost scholar and analyst of U.S.-Soviet relations, Mr. Kennan first articulated the American policy of containment to respond to Soviet expansionism after World War II. Mr. Kennan capped a long career in the Foreign Service with ambassadorial appointments to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. He has devoted years since to improving U.S. scholarship of Russian studies. His own contribution to that scholarship includes 18 books, among them two Pulitzer Prize winners.

I talked with him this afternoon and asked him to reflect, as a student of Russian history, on the significance of this moment.

GEORGE KENNAN: I think it's of tremendous significance. I don't mean to underestimate the difficulties that Russia's going to have in the immediate future, but I do think that this is a turning point of the most momentous historical significance. I find it difficult to find any other turning point in modern Russian history that I think is so significant as this one.

MACNEIL: Why? I mean there've been plenty of turning points.

KENNAN: There've been plenty of turning points. But by what happened on those streets of Moscow and Leningrad in these last three or four days, the Russian people, for the first time in their history, have turned their back on the manner in which they've been ruled, not just in the Soviet period, but in centuries before. They have demanded a voice in the designing of their own society, their own future, and they have done so

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successfully. And I can't think of any precedent for this in Russian history. Even 1917 had nothing quite like this. It's the most hopeful turning point that I've ever seen in Russian affairs, and I think it's a very basic one.

I think the fact that from now on Russia is going to be, in its political composition, its political habits, the way it's run, it is going to be a different Russia than it's ever been before.

MACNEIL: How do you explain it, how this could happen in this way?

KENNAN: Yes. Part of it, of course, is the communications revolution. Part of it is the fact that you now hav a far higher proportion of the people of Russia who are educated people, who do read, who do listen to what comes out over the media. But part of it also is the revulsion after the seven decades of mistreatment which they have had at the hands of a communist regime.

And I think, you see, they did realize in 1917 that the czar's government was not a very good government anymore, that the czar was not an impressive person. In fact, he was a rather foolish man. And they lost their confidence in that sort of a government. Many of them naively thought this one would be a better one, the communist one. But there was never a greater disillusion of any people than that.

And I think, again, as I say, that it was partly the revulsion against what they've just been through that gave them the courage and the determination not to acept it anymore.

MACNEIL: Many people have worried that after centuries of repressive or paternalistic government, that the habits, the psychological habits would be so strong that when things became messy and uncertain, as they have been with this perestroika, that the temptation to go back to something secure and strong, just for stability, would be irresistible. And why do you think that hasn't happened?

KENNAN: Well, I have worried about that too.

MACNEIL: Excuse me for interrupting. But plenty of Soviet people have been telling reporters that on the street: "Well, we'd rather go back to the strong stuff than put up with this chaos."

KENNAN: That was a little bit -- it could delude you, hearing these things from them. Because every time there has come a showdown, at least in the great cities, they have come out

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in favor of an attempt to have a democratic development.

I am not sure how all this proceeds out in the countryside. I think there is much less understanding in large parts of the countryside far from the great cities for what democracy has to offer than there is in Moscow or Leningrad. On the other hand, these places are the center of the political vitality of the country. And there's no doubt about it now that -- there's no doubt about the way that public opinion, Russian opinion inclines. There's been test after test of it, but none ever as complete as this and none where the answer was ever made as dramatically evident as it has been in these last days.

MACNEIL: So do you think that six years of experimenting with glasnost, freedom, has really changed the political psychology of the Soviet people?

KENNAN: Yes, I think it has. And I think we do owe this, in very large measure, to Gorbachev. And that should not be forgotten. He has had his faults, his weaknesses, his blind spots too, but this has been his great service to Russia. This is partly the result of it. He was the one, after all, who made all this possible by making glasnost possible, by permitting the press to speak again, by permitting people to speak. All this by throwing open the contacts with the outside world. That all is part of the background of what has now happened.

MACNEIL: It's really ironic, in a way, isn't it, that -- I mean he, as he admitted in his press conference today, was in some ways the author of his misfortune by putting so much trust in so many hard-liners close to him, and yet in another way the author of his salvation by having created or permitted some of the freedoms and freedom of expression that saved him.

KENNAN: That's quite true. And I'm sure that he will hear many accusations that he has a measure of responsibility for these events that happened because of his indulgence of these people. After all, he did appoint several of them, and the most important ones, to the positions they occupied.

But one can be too tough on him here. He was well aware that the party and the police still had great power in large parts of the country. Perhaps not, as I say, in the big cities, but way out in the provincial areas. And I think he wanted, if he could, to keep them aboard and not to push them off into a position where this sort of thing would occur. He may have gone too far in pacting with them, in giving them positions, in taling with them, and he may suffer for it now. But I think we have to realize that it was not easy for him. And also, because he still clung for a long time to his belief that the party could be made a suitable instrument of change.

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MACNEIL: I don't know whether you heard that part of the press conference, but he reiterated that today, that he would stay in the party and that he thought that those forces that were in favor of democratic reform could be encouraged and that the party itself could be reformed and made an instrument of change.

KENNAN: Robin, here too, I would not like to be hard on him. Loyalty is the only absolute human virtue which is always respected. It's better to be loyal, in a way, to your shabbiest friends than the opposite. And I know that he parts with great difficulty from his belief in the party. It was in the party that he grew up. It was there that he got his position. And in a way, I respect him for his fidelity to it, but I think he's wrong.

MACNEIL: But could he miss -- if this is the historic turning point you've said, could he miss that turning point and be left behind because of that loyalty?

KENNAN: Yes, partly because of that.

Mind you, I think that his contribution to the development of Russia was largely exhausted before these recent events occurred. He had -- what I mean by that is that he had done pretty much what was his historic mission, which was to break the hold of the party over all of Russian life and to throw open freedom of speech and the other things that he did open up. That was a historic contribution, and I'm sure that he will be given credit in the perspective of history for what he's done.

But he did, as I say, have these blind spots. One of them was his belief that the party could be made an adequate means of change, and another was, of course, his hope and belief that the country could be kept together, that the empire could be kept together, that the other republics could be held in. I think, too, was a failure of insight and judgment on his part. The day for that has passed. The day for the great empires is gone. The day, in particular, for the unilingual and the uninational empires is gone. By that I mean the ones that embrace a number of nations and a number of languages. The others have gone: the old Turkish empire, the old Austro-Hungarian empire, the British empire. They have all yielded to the forces of modern nationalism. And it was clear that the Russian Soviet empire was going to have to yield to these forces, too, eventually.

MACNEIL: Do you think what happened in the last few days accelerates that?

KENNAN: Yes, I do indeed. I do indeed. And I think this is going to affect his position, because he had hitched

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wagon to the star of the central authority in the Soviet Union. Now, what has happened in these last few days is going to increase the authority of the individual republics. And by that same token, it is bound to decrease the importance and the scope of power of the central governmental apparatus. And to the extent that that is diminished, so will be diminished his role in Russian affairs, his influence.

MACNEIL: Some of the new republics, including Boris Yeltsin's Russian Federation, have talked about having their own armies, their own security forces. Since the United States was so anxious to see the Soviet Union stay together, so that it would have one military superpower to deal with, does this disintegration or decentralization you're predicting pose security problems for the West? I mean you have that massive number of nuclear weapons and everything.

KENNAN: So far as the nuclear weapons are concerned, this union treaty, which was to have been thrown open for signature by the republics three or four days ago -- and that, incidentally, is probably the crucial fact that caused the timing of this effort to overthrow the regime -- this union treaty did, it seemed to me, in its provisions, take care of the danger of nuclear weapons getting into the wrong hands. As far as that is concerned, I think we can be relieved.

And otherwise, I think that we should recognize the inevitability of the decentralization of this state, and not put ourselves in opposition to it.

MACNEIL: You said a moment ago that loyalty is prized, often, above everything in politicians. But so also, in successful politicians, is a degree of opportunism. Is Mr. Gorbachev nimble enough and adroit enough and opportunistic enough to seize this moment and revitalize his leadership, or is he really on the wave of the past, do you think?

KENNAN: In my opinion, he will not be able to do that. I can't really go into all the reasons why not. They're partly ones of personality, partly ones of what has happened. But everyone, as you know, in public life has his hour and his period. You can't expect to have really many more than one. And I think Gorbachev, for whom I have high respect, I think that he, as I say, has pretty well exhausted what he had to give to the Russian situation.

We're going on now to another generation, to another group of problems. And I doubt that he can expect to exercise the kind of leadership with relation to them that he has exercised in recent years.

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MACNEIL: Where does Mr. Yeltsin fit into that picture?

KENNAN: He comes out, of course, as the great personality of the hour, in Russia and in the Soviet Union. He, too, is a man for whom I have respect. He has qualities quite different from those of Gorbachev. Gorbachev was not good, really, with the contact with the people. Yeltsin just the opposite. And he has, of course, increased his stature in the public eye enormousy by his behavior in recent days. He's shown himself to be a courageous and strong man in a difficult situation, and they all appreciate that. But more important than that, too, is fact that he was popularly elected. And those who elected him are all aware of that, and they are reluctant to be deprived of the choice they made when they came to that decision.

MACNEIL: Finally, as the man often credited with being the author of the policy that the West adopted which succeeded in -- the containment policy that brought the Soviet Union to change, internal change, what do you think the posture of the United States should be now towards the new realities in the Soviet Union?

KENNAN: I think that it should be the posture that John Quincy Adams outlined in a Fourth of July speech in Washington a great many years ago, when he said that America is the guardian of the liberties of all the world -- no, she is the friend of the liberties of all the world. She is the guardian only of her own.

I think we have to give all the encouragement we can to the Russians in this situation. But in doing so, we cannot regard it as one great undivided country. We have to take account of the decentralization which is in progress, and we hav to address our efforts, our help, our attention, partly to the individual republics, whose needs vary very greatly among them, and not all to the central government.

MACNEIL: Well, Professor Kennan, thank you very much for joining us.

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